

OFFICE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS

October 3, 2011

Questions and Answers

Concretely, what do you hope to achieve with the creation of an Office of Religious Freedom?

- This is a priority for the government and we remain committed to getting it right.
- As announced in the Speech from the Throne on June 3rd, this Office of Religious Freedom will be created within my department, to promote freedom of religion and belief as a key objective of Canadian foreign policy. This office will be a key part of our broader efforts to promote human rights and help protect religious minorities around the world.
- The Office will conduct advocacy, analysis, policy development and programming to protect and advocate on behalf of religious minorities under threat.
- We look forward to working with the international community, including civil society, to promote the human right to freedom of religion and belief around the world.

Some have criticized the proposal to create the Office of Religious Freedom as a blurring of the time-honoured line that separates church and state? What is your reaction to this comment?

- Canada has a proud tradition of defending fundamental human rights, including freedom of religion and belief.
- That tradition forms an integral part of Canadian foreign policy and is a priority for the Government.
- History has proven that religious freedom and democratic freedom are inseparable.
- As Foreign Affairs Minister, I have been meeting with like-minded countries and other stakeholders to discuss the office and protection of religious minorities.
- In June, I met with Canada's ambassador to the Holy See in Rome.

- In July I also met the Holy See's ambassador to Canada, Archbishop Quintana.
- I reiterated Canada's commitment to establishing the office while in Istanbul, Turkey on July 15 to attend a meeting on combating religious intolerance.
- In my first visit to Washington, I met the US ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, on Aug. 3.
- Last month, I met with the Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of the largest group of Ismaili Muslims, in Paris, France.

Is the creation of this Office politically motivated to curry favour with certain constituencies?

- This is about upholding Canada's commitment to defending fundamental human rights, the right to freedom of religion and belief, opposing religious hatred and promoting Canadian values of pluralism and tolerance abroad.
- Canada has tirelessly advocated for the individual's right to freedom of religion throughout international fora, in bilateral interactions and through high-level statements.

How much the event cost?

- This is a consultation event. As such, costs are minimal.

How were participants chosen for the event?

- Participants were invited on the basis of a demonstrated interest and track record in promoting respect for religious freedom.

If Pressed – Why were there no panellists of the Islamic faith?

- *We invited panelists from the Muslim community who, unfortunately, were not available.*

Have you thought of creating this office as a body that reports directly to members of Parliament to ensure complete impartiality?

- Promoting freedom and democracy is a cornerstone of Canadian policy. For this reason, the decision is made to establish the Office of Religious Freedom within the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Why are we creating this Office in Canada when we live in a society that protects religious freedom?

- While Canadians enjoy the privileges of living in a free and democratic society, the same is not true everywhere else. As citizens of the global community, we have a duty to defend the vulnerable and protect and promote human rights and human dignity, at home and abroad.
- Canada will not hesitate to speak out to protect and promote freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law internationally. And Canada will not look the other way when a minority, anywhere, is denied its human rights or fundamental freedoms.
- It is our duty to uphold the rights of the afflicted and give voice to the voiceless.
- We see this office as part of our effort to promote human rights, help protect religious minorities around the world, and champion Canadian values of pluralism and tolerance.

On which countries/issues will the Office focus its program of work?

- The purpose of these consultations is to help inform and further the thinking on the program of work of the Office.

What does Canada bring to the promotion of the human right to freedom of religion?

- Canada is a vigorous defender of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.
- Canada has tirelessly advocated for the individual's right to freedom of religion throughout international fora, in bilateral and multilateral interactions and through high-level interventions.